

ARTICLE APPEARED

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

CN PAGE 5, Sec. 1 STAT

8 April 1984

Nicaraguan leaders hunting for help against fired-up rebels

STAT

By George de Lama

Chicago Tribune

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras—Looking to the U.S. Congress for support, CIA-backed Nicaraguan guerrillas have undergone a facelift and mounted a two-month offensive that is raising eyebrows in Central America.

The offensive, which includes a stepped-up campaign to mine Nicaraguan ports, has visibly shaken Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government, prompting it to send emissaries around the world in search of arms and defense materiel.

The new level of fighting also threatens to embroil the Reagan administration and France in a bitter squabble over the European ally's decision to help the Sandinistas defend their ports against mining.

From their CIA safehouse in Honduras, the contras, as the rebels are called, said they are entrenched too deeply in Nicaragua for the Sandinistas to ignore—or eliminate.

ACCORDING TO the rebels, they have 8,000 men under arms within Nicaragua and are training 2,000 more. The recent fighting has reached major towns just 70 miles from Managua, the capital. Both developments are acknowledged by the Sandinistas.

"We are a real factor," said Adolfo Calero, president and commander in chief of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), the main contra group financed by the CIA. "The Sandinistas have refused to recognize that a civil war exists within Nicaragua. But the Sandinistas have been incapable of expelling us or of liquidating our forces."

The contras see brightening prospects for forcing the Sandinistas into a political settlement; last week the U.S. Senate approved a Reagan administration request for \$21 million more in aid for their cause.

The perception that the contras have done better in pushing their guerrilla war in recent weeks was partly responsible for the Senate vote, Western diplomats in Tegucigalpa say.

"Everybody likes to put their money on a winner," one diplomat said.

THE VIEW THAT the contras are hurting the Sandinistas was enhanced when that government announced that it is searching the world for better arms, recently dispatching Defense Minister Humberto Ortega to the Soviet Union and North Korea, military sources said.

His brother, Daniel Ortega, the Sandinista junta coordinator, went on an urgent mission to Mexico, then had to cut the visit short because of a contra raid. Another Sandinista commander, Sergio Ramirez, went to Libya about the same time.

In a change of tactics, the contras no longer vow to overthrow the Sandinistas or give a timetable for how long it would take.

Instead they point to the Sandinistas' move to hold elections in November as proof that pressure—and U.S. policy—is working. They also claim that their anticommunist, pro-democratic message is winning converts.

Besides the CIA, others are getting into the act. Cuban exiles in Miami, for example, "are our second-most-important source of support," Calero said. They donate medical skills and services and "hundreds of thousands of dollars."

BEFORE THE offensive, the contras purged five high-ranking, former national guard officers who served under late dictator Anastasio Somoza. Three other former national guard officers then quit.

The ex-officers were widely seen as tainting the entire contra movement by identifying it with Somoza's harsh and corrupt dictatorship, diplomats said.

Now only 2 of 7 regional chiefs and 3 of 22 FDN task force leaders are former national guardsmen, Calero said. Of 400 squad leaders, only 30 once served in Somoza's dreaded force.

To get supplies to rebel forces more quickly, the contras also took over direct distribution duties from the CIA, enlisting the aid of new, talented exiles with business backgrounds.

With a new, streamlined command, the FDN and other contra groups have, in effect, begun to fight more like guerrillas than a conventional army, military experts and intelligence analysts said.

CALERO AND other FDN leaders insisted that the moves had nothing to do with pleasing Congress or the "blue eyes" as the contras call their CIA paymasters and tactical advisers.

"We are not acting on behalf of the U.S.," Calero said in an interview. "We are acting on our own accord. We did not reorganize to clean our image. We did it to substitute more effective people. You don't have to be a military man to manage logistics or financing."

The new look is reflected in Comando, a slick monthly publication put out by the FDN with war news. It is also seen in the prominence of men such as Calero, an articulate, U.S.-educated former manager of the Coca-Cola Co. bottling plant in Managua.

But the internal changes have been overshadowed by the rebels' stepped-up campaign to mine Nicaraguan ports. Several foreign ships, including a Soviet oil tanker, have been damaged by mines.

The contras speak often of using only Nicaraguans to fight a Nicaraguan battle, turning away Cuban exiles and anticommunists from other nations who volunteer to fight alongside them.

But a slick, blue-and-white bumper sticker perhaps tells more about their real hope for the future in Nicaragua. Recalling the U.S. invasion in the Caribbean last year, it says simply:

"Grenada: 83. Nicaragua: 84."